


To: MSU Steering Committee
From: R. Mark Worden, Professor 
Topic: Ad-Hoc committee to assess freedom speech at MSU and report to Univ. Council
Date: November 6, 2023

Freedom of speech has long been considered a cornerstone of universities. However, there is growing evidence that many universities are implementing policies that restrict freedom of speech in a manner that damages the education they provide their students as well as their own reputations.

Concerns that such restrictions reduce students' access to diverse points of view and thus limit their opportunities to develop critical thinking skills by analyzing alternative viewpoints prompted two Congressional hearings on academic freedom in June, 2018. Written testimonies of from several expert witnesses expressed serious concerns about threats to US freedom of speech. On Sept. 26, 2018, the US House of Representatives' *Education and Workforce Committee* held a [Hearing on Academic Freedom at Universities](#). Threats to academic freedom were also investigated by a second US House of Representatives hearing: "[The State of Intellectual Freedom in America](#)" by the Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the Constitution and Civil Justice. More recently, in March, 2023, a Congressional Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development held a hearing entitled, "[Diversity of Thought: Protecting Free Speech on College Campuses](#)".

There is significant evidence of threats to free speech at MSU. The recently released 2024 a [national survey by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression \(FIRE\)](#) revealed that MSU has the lowest free-speech ranking of the four major universities in Michigan (MSU, UM, WS, and MTU). MSU also ranked in the bottom 36% nationally in free speech in FIRE's survey of 55,000 currently enrolled students at over 250 colleges and universities

Additional evidence includes MSU's "Inclusive Guide" website, which recently brought derision on MSU by claiming that the commonly used words "gift", "bunny", "America", and "Christmas tree" were offensive and should not be used. Online articles mocking this guidance were published by sites having national readership, including the [New York Post](#) and the [College Fix](#) may have simultaneously damaged MSU's reputation and conveyed a message that MSU does not value free speech.

Moreover, in the past few years, there have been blatant efforts to silence invited speakers on MSU's campus based on their political persuasion, an act that arguably violates MSU's Anti Discrimination Policy. For example, two years ago, about 5 minutes into an invited talk by a nationally known speaker on MSU's campus, a group of about 20 "protesters" simultaneously stood up, shouted obscenities at the speaker, and then tried to shout her down. Fortunately, the student group that invited the speaker had paid for several MSU police officers to be present, and the police were able to remove the "protesters" so the talk could eventually continue. However, as the hundreds of attendees left the building after the talk, the "protesters" shouted obscenities at them.

Although this incident was [reported in the State News](#), to my knowledge, the MSU administration did not say or do anything to prevent a similar occurrence, which could lead to another major embarrassment at MSU, [as happened at Stanford in March, 2023](#).

In the absence of apparent administrative efforts address threats to freedom-of-speech on MSU's campus, I propose to organize an Ad-Hoc committee to assess the status of free speech at MSU. The committee would seek input from experts on academic freedom of speech, including FIRE and the National Association of Scholars. It would compile its findings into a report that would be submitted to the University Council, along with any resolution(s) appropriate to enhance freedom of speech at MSU.

Thank you in advance for any guidance you might offer on this important and timely assessment project.

5.3.3.3. Faculty members of the FHC shall represent a diversity of faculty appointments, pursuant to relevant union contracts.

5.3.4. Terms of Appointment

5.3.4.1. The terms of appointment of faculty representatives on the FHC shall be three consecutive two-year terms to ensure continuity and stability of membership.

5.3.4.2. If, for any reason, a member is unable to serve and more than one annual year remains of the appointment, the Steering Committee will identify a replacement from the most recent list of eligible volunteers; the new appointee will be eligible for reappointment for two subsequent terms. If less than one annual year remains, the seat will remain vacant until the next regular appointment period.

5.3.5. Responsibilities of the FHC

5.3.5.1. The FHC will serve as the faculty voice on issues related to the design, implementation, and evaluation of healthcare plans.

5.3.5.2. The FHC will consult with, provide information, and make recommendations to the University Committee on Faculty Affairs on matters concerning the economic impact of health benefits.

5.3.5.3. The FHC shall serve as an advocate for faculty on matters related to health care and healthcare benefits.

5.4. **Ad Hoc Committees of the University Council**

5.4.1. Ad hoc committees shall be kept to a minimum. Before establishing an ad hoc committee, the University Council shall consult with the Steering Committee to determine whether the commission might appropriately be referred to one or more university-level standing committees.

5.4.2. The Steering Committee shall recommend to the University Council the composition, method of selecting members, functions, and procedures of ad hoc committees.

